

Penn and Liberty Avenues (Commercial Buildings)
(Whitten Building)
641 Liberty Avenue
Pittsburgh
Allegheny County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5152-C

HABS
PA,
2-PITBU,
45-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
MID-ATLANTIC REGION NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
PENN AND LIBERTY AVENUES (COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS)
(Whitten Building)

HABS No. PA - 5152C

Location: 641 Liberty Avenue, Pittsburgh
Allegheny County, Pennsylvania

Quadrangle Name: Pittsburgh West/Pittsburgh East
Quadrangle Scale: 1:24,000

UTM References:

- a. Zone: 17 Easting: 584700 Northing: 4477110
- b. Zone: 17 Easting: 584690 Northing: 4477170
- c. Zone: 17 Easting: 584830 Northing: 4477220
- d. Zone: 17 Easting: 584860 Northing: 4477140

Present Owner: Penn Liberty Holding Company

Present Occupant: Vacant

Present Use: Vacant

Significance:

The Whitten Building's primary significance was tied to its use as a commission house in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Although it was one of numerous produce houses that lined Liberty Avenue between the 600 and 1100 blocks, it stood out with its paired neighbor, number 639, as one of the earliest warehouses built specifically for the commercial trade. At the time of its construction (sometime between 1860 and 1873), converted dwellings more commonly housed the produce markets. The Whitten Building not only was important for its Victorian roots, but also for its twentieth century physical and functional changes that reflected the organic evolution of Pittsburgh's downtown.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: circa 1860 - circa 1873

Based upon stylistic evidence of a Victorian commercial facade in historic views, the Whitten Building appears to have been built before the 1880a. The more specific dates, 1860 - 1873, have been assigned in light of the Whitten Building's identical adjacent neighbor, the King Building, at 639 Liberty Avenue. The range of constructions date for that building was established by an 1860 transfer of title and 1873 directory listing at that address, in addition to stylistic analysis.

2. Architect: unknown

3. Original and subsequent owners:

References to the chain of title to the land upon which the structure stands are in the Office of the Recorder of Deeds, Allegheny County Courthouse Annex, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

1830 Deed, September 22, 1830, recorded in Volume 42, pages 137 - 38.

James and Nancy C. Adams to John Whitten and Emma Whitten.

1921 Will, December 31, 1921, recorded in Lawrence County Will Book Volume 13, page 215.

Emma Whitten to her nephew, Richard Floyd, subject to payment of certain legacies and a mortgage. Release of legacies and Quit Claim Deeds recorded in Deed Books, Volume 2379, page 664; Volume 2362, pages 545 - 47 and Volume 2387, page 111.

1938 Will, October 28, 1938, recorded in Will Book, Volume 241, page 23.

Richard Floyd to Ellie V. Floyd.

1948 Deed, October 28, 1948, recorded in Volume 3014, pages 741 - 42.

Ellie V. Floyd to Arthur William Grabe and Selma Louise, his wife.

- 1956 Arthur William Grabe died February 20, 1956, leaving to survive him Selma Louise Grabe.
- 1970 Deed, January 24, 1970, recorded in Volume 4817, pages 265 - 68.
Selma Henry to M & P Investment Co. (partnership composed of Ira M. Morgan, Bernard Pinsker)
- 1980 Deed, February 29, 1980, recorded in Volume 6227, pages 541 - 44.
M & P Investment Co. to Penn Liberty Investments Inc.
- 1981 Articles of Conversion of Penn Liberty Investments, Inc., September 8, 1981, to Penn Liberty Holding Company.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers:

David T. Riffle, who maintained his office in the Keenan building at 643 - 647 Liberty (next to the Whitten Building), executed the major alterations in 1908. Riffle had a long career in the building trade: After receiving his education in the public schools of Fayette County, he learned bricklaying, then moved to Pittsburgh in 1895. Having demonstrated his capabilities rapidly, Riffle opened his own office as a building contractor and continued his business into the 1930s. His work on the Whitten Building, undertaken relatively early in his career, was among his many projects which included office buildings, churches and industrial plants.

5. Original plans and construction:

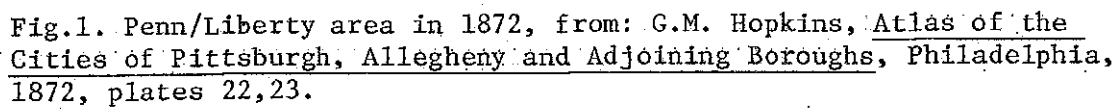
The original Whitten Building was a four-story and basement brick warehouse with clear span open loft space at each floor. It was constructed of masonry and heavy timber and had a stair along the east wall towards the front and an elevator along the east wall in the rear third of the building.

6. Alterations and additions:

The most significant alteration to the Whitten Building occurred in 1908, as documented in the Pittsburgh Bureau of Building Inspection, Record Book of Alterations and Repairs, Volume 3, 31 March 1908. The estimated \$7,500 alteration undertaken by D.T. Riffle for William Whitten would have at least encompassed the

reconstruction of the Liberty Avenue facade. That alteration replaced the Victorian commercial facade with its characteristic lintels, arched openings, gable and finials with a free-classical style facade that responded to early twentieth century taste for classicism. The new facade featured shields, dentilled cornices, pilasters, and regular rectangular fenestration. Subsequent changes included a new shopfront which left the first floor stone surround intact, and interior alterations, both in 1952.

FOURTH WARD.



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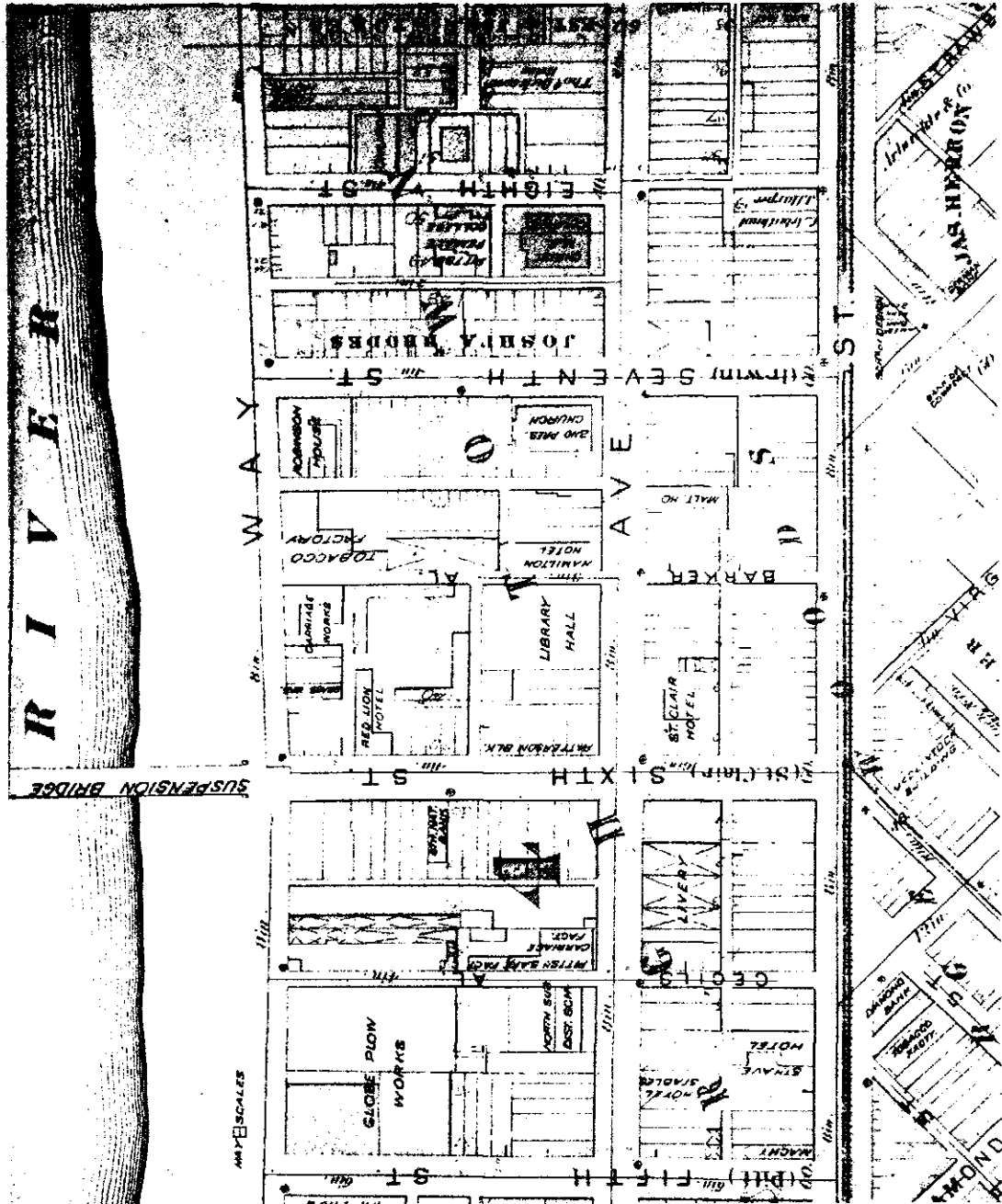


Fig. 2. Penn/Liberty area in 1882, from: G.M. Hopkins, Atlas of the Cities of Pittsburgh and Allegheny, Philadelphia, 1882, plate 1.

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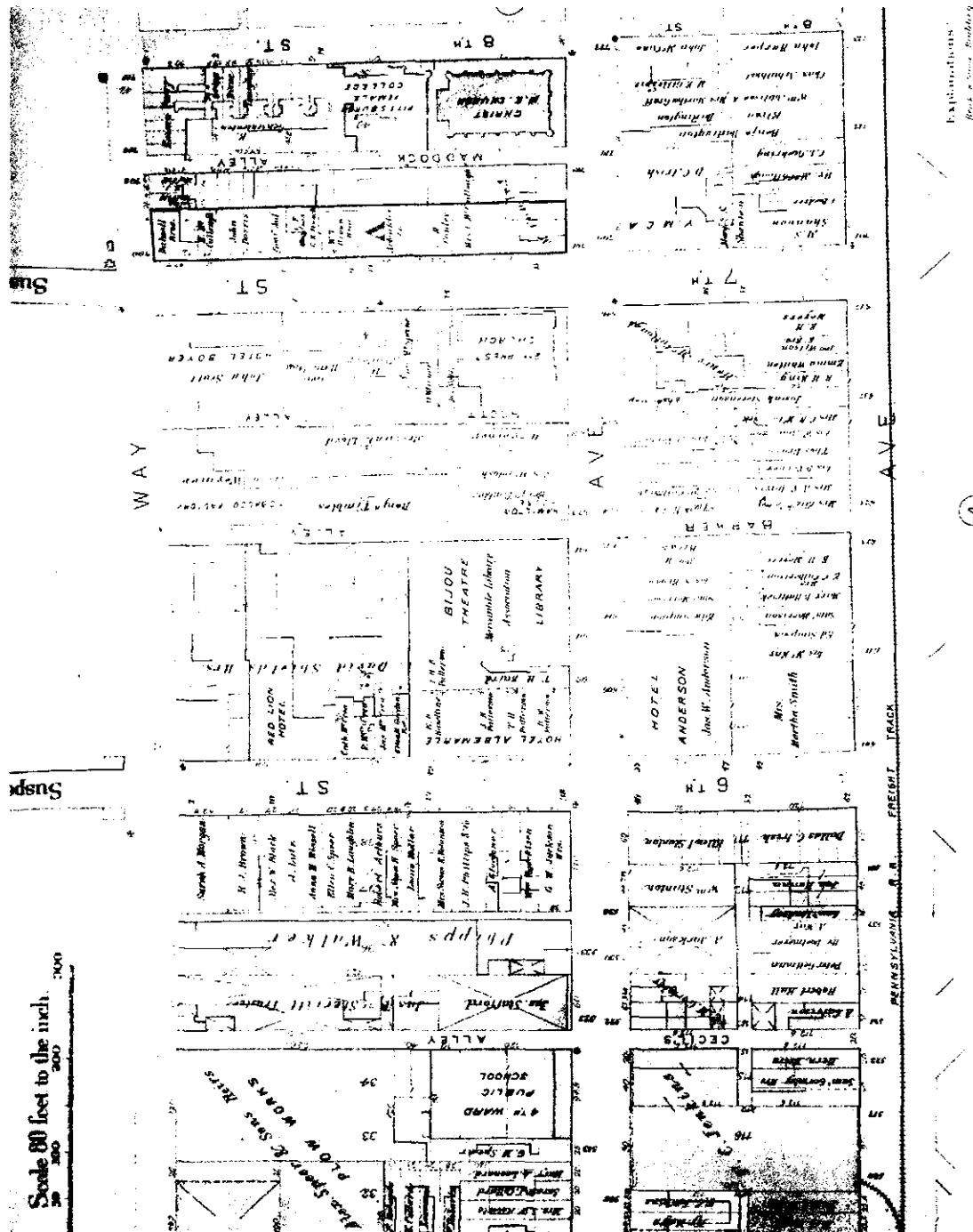


Fig. 3. Penn/Liberty area in 1889, from: G.M. Hopkins, Atlas of the City of Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, 1889, Vol. 1, plate 5.

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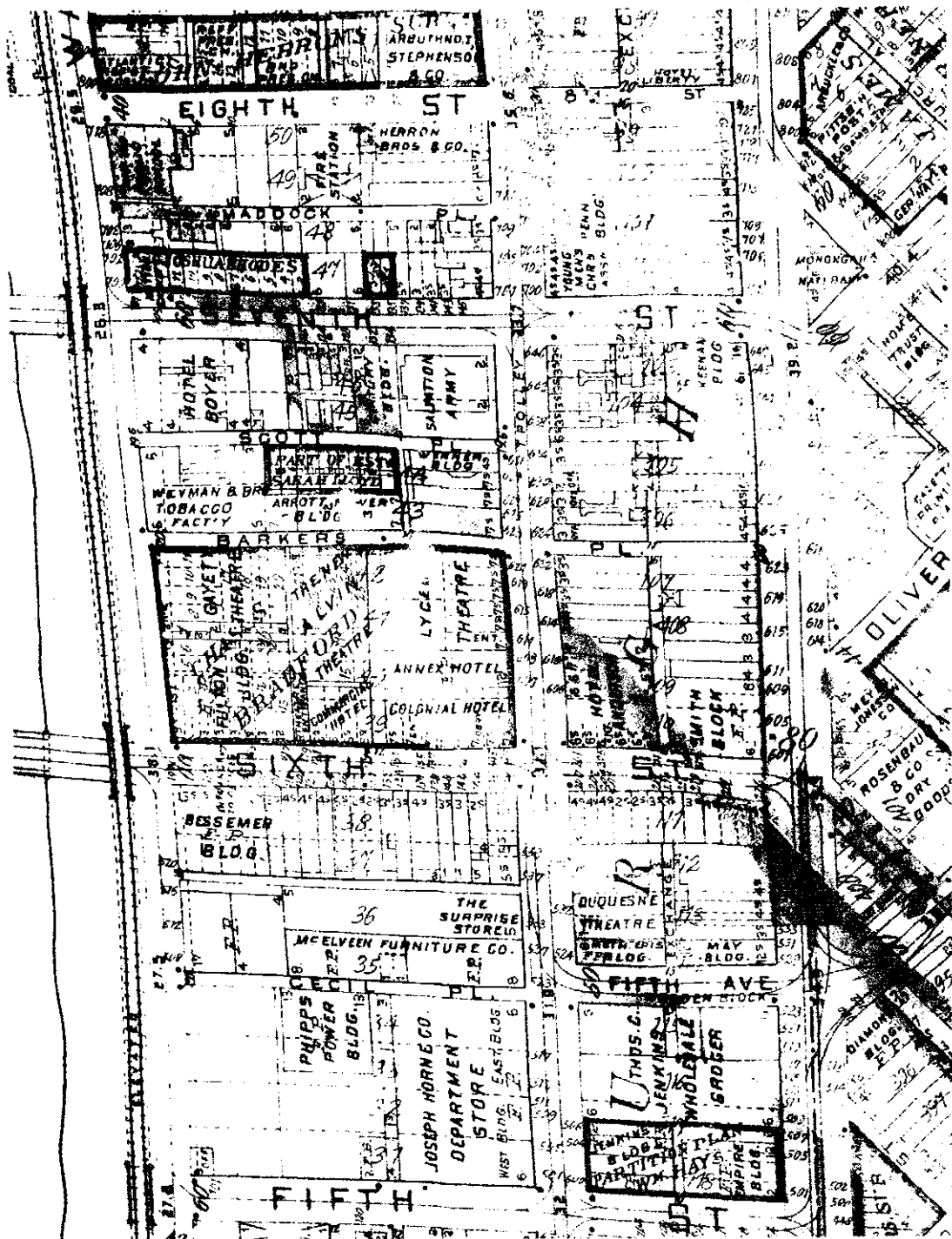


Fig. 4. Penn/Liberty area in 1910, from: G.M. Hopkins,
 Map of Greater Pittsburgh, PA, Philadelphia, 1910, plate 1.

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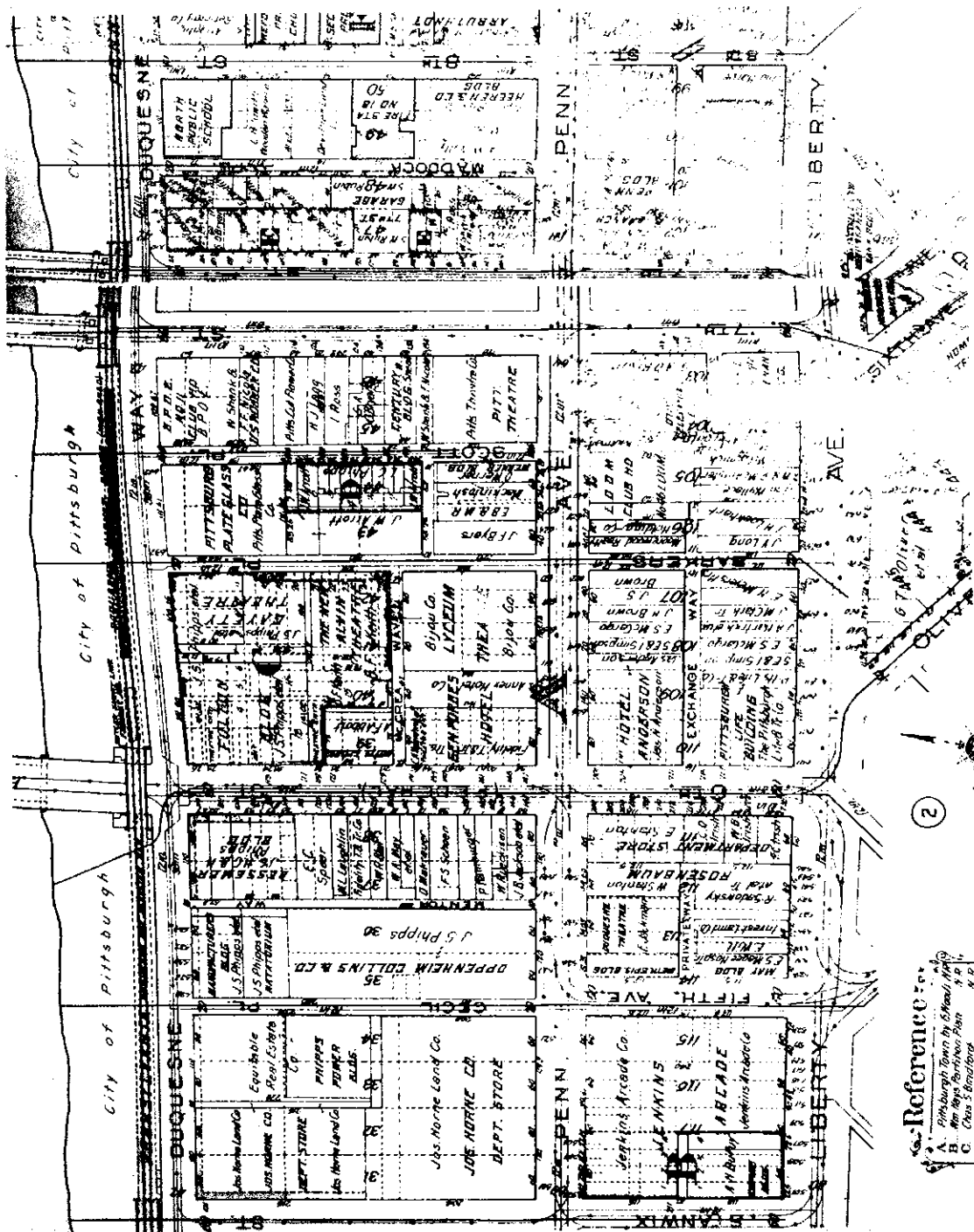


Fig. 5. Penn/Liberty area in 1923, from: G.M.Hopkins, Real Estate Plat Book of the City of Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, 1923, Vol. 1, plate 4.

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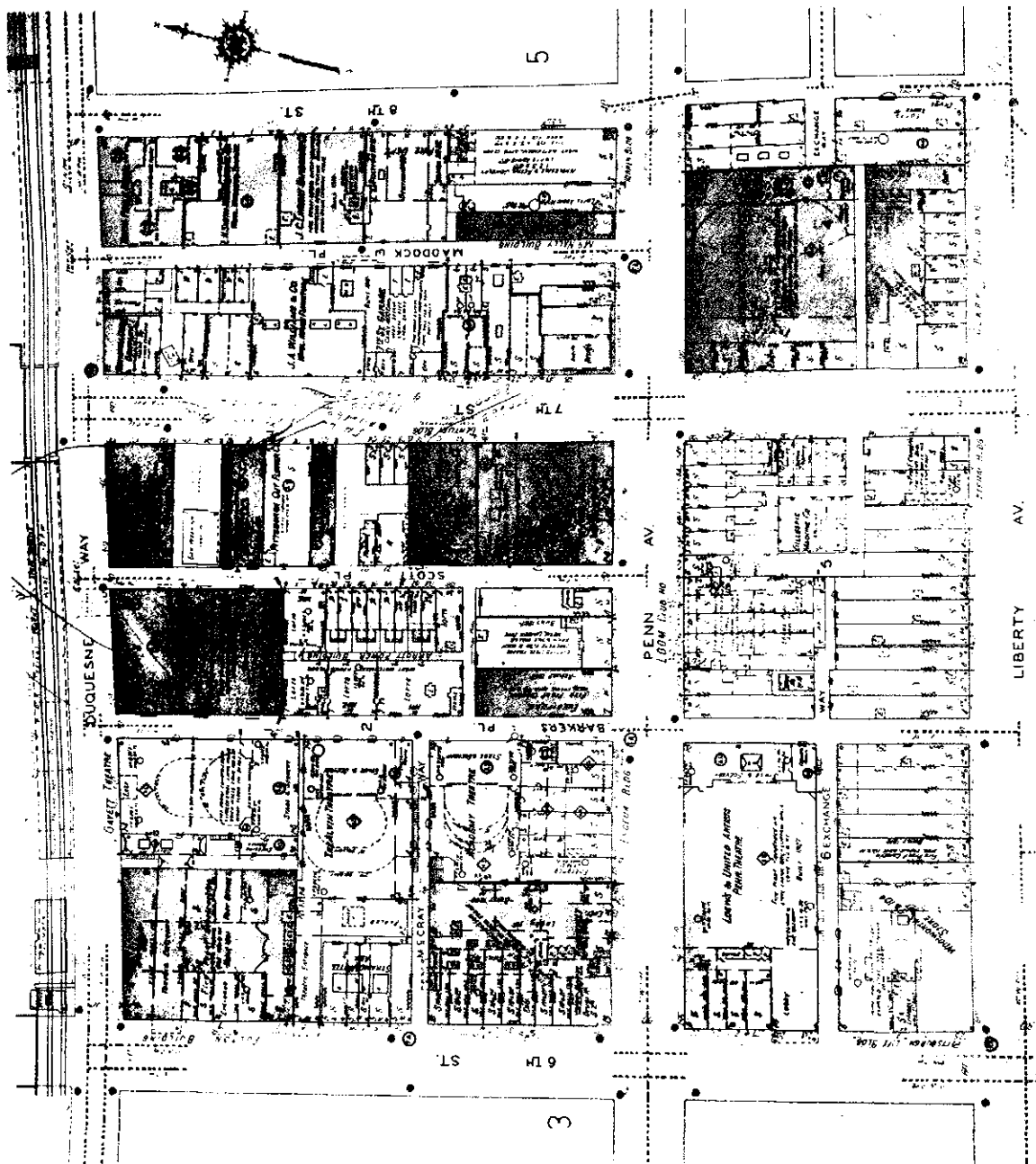


Fig. 6. Penn/Liberty area in 1927, from: Sanborn Map Company, Insurance Maps of Pittsburgh, New York, 1927, Vol. 1, plate 4.

B. Historical Context:

City industrial histories note the principal development of the commission merchant trade in the 1860s, a date which corresponds with the demolition of the city markets in 1852, and the advent of rail transportation. The Pennsylvania Railroad at Seventh and Grant street ran its Freight Division along Liberty Avenue as early as 1851 and the Citizens' Passenger Railway shuttled up and down Penn Avenue by 1859. Shortly after 1889, the freight lines along Liberty Avenue moved two blocks north to Duquesne Way, and Liberty Avenue, too, supported trolley lines that gave the general public easy access to the street, while proximity of the Sixth Street Bridge that crossed the Allegheny River provided one more important transportation artery. The combined effect of these circumstances was to make the 600-1100 blocks of Liberty Avenue primary locations for commerce and shipping. Photographs of the district dating from the 1880s, 1890s, and early twentieth century confirm this pattern of development. Typically, three-story converted brick dwellings, and later, four and five-story brick warehouses, roughly 18 feet wide and 100 feet deep, were dressed with signs that listed "Produce", "Cantelopes", "Fruit", "Iron City Produce", and the like. Shed porches spanned across the side walks, providing shelter for delivery, while creating the old street market ambience. The sheds were built in front of old and new buildings, including 631, 633, and 635 Liberty, all of which dated from the 1890s.

The concentration of produce commission houses on Liberty Avenue was remarkable. The 1885 city directory lists commission merchants at 605, 607, 611, 613, 619, 621, 625, 629, 631, 633, 635, 637, 639 and 641, in short, at all but five properties of the 600 block. With the growing number of commission merchants and sales throughout the 1890s, it is not surprising that thirty of the leading firms organized the Pittsburgh Produce and Fruit Exchange in 1895. The purpose of the Exchange was to increase business even further and protect the interests of both its members and shippers. By 1905 the trade was shifting east out of the increasingly congested downtown, toward the railroad produce depot at 21st and 22nd and Liberty; a secondary destination was southwest towards the B & O Railroad line near Ferry and Water streets. That direction is apparent in the number of merchants on the 600 block of Liberty; eleven in 1902, and six in 1906. In their place came theaters, places of amusement, offices, and more luxurious dry goods operations such as clothing, furniture, and jewelry stores that made the region an adjunct to the booming downtown.

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Within Liberty Avenue's era as a center for the commission merchants trade, the Whitten Building housed its share of firms. Among these were Martin Derrick (1880 - 86), Coggins and Gueppner (1893), H.A. Gueppner (1894), and E.M. West whose name was splashed across the gable from approximately 1895 until 1905 when Ash and Baldwin became the last commission merchants at this Liberty Avenue address. Notably, throughout these early years, the Whitten family, owners from 1830 to 1921, do not appear to have used the building themselves. Since the sale to Richard Floyd in the 1920s, very possibly the same Richard Floyd as the local hardware company, the building has undergone several changes in ownership and tenants. From 1930 to 1940, John Hughes Co., Inc., optometrist, and Schume's Health Institute, turkish baths, occupied the building. Other tenants during this period included Jerry Fedele's beauty shop and Joseph M. True, accountsnt. The Gemini health spa leased the second floor into the 1970s while the Penn Wig Company operated from the first floor. At the time of the building's demolition in 1984, the first floor bore the sign of Steve's Valet, tuxedo rentals.

For more information on the Penn-Liberty area, see

LOYAL ORDER OF MOOSE BUILDING (Moose Hall)	HABS No. PA-5149
WALLACE AND MCALLISTER BUILDINGS	HABS No. PA-5150
KINGSBACHER'S	HABS No. PA-5151
PENN AND LIBERTY AVENUES (COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS)	HABS No. PA-5152
PENN AND LIBERTY AVENUES (COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS) (McCormick Building)	HABS No. PA-5152-A
PENN AND LIBERTY AVENUES (COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS) (King Building)	HABS No. PA-5152-B
PENN AND LIBERTY AVENUES (COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS) (Arbuthnot Building)	HABS No. PA-5152-D
PENN AND LIBERTY AVENUES (COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS) (Harper Building)	HABS No. PA-5152-E
PENN AND LIBERTY AVENUES (COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS) (Lipson Building)	HABS No. PA-5152-F



Fig. 7. 600 Block of Liberty Avenue, in 1899, from: 100 Views of Pittsburgh, H. Hammond Hook, and Co. Pittsburgh, 1899.

PITTSBURG BUSINESS DIRECTORY. 117

W. H. B. BULGER. H. J. WILBERT. H. A. HOFFMAN.



Bulger, Wilbert & Co.,
SUCCESSORS TO
WILLIAMS & BULGER,
Commission Merchants
AND WHOLESALE DEALERS IN
Fruit and
Produce.
639 Liberty Ave., PITTSBURG, PA.
TELEPHONE 642.

Fig. 8. 639 and the edge of 641 Liberty Avenue, from: R.L.Polk's Pittsburgh and Allegheny Directory, 1892, p. 117.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character:

When the Whitten Building was altered radically in 1908 its Victorian commercial style facade gave way to a free-classical style front. The choice of this style was in keeping with contemporary taste as the vocabulary of Beaux Arts classical architecture was filtered and adapted to buildings of even modest importance in the early twentieth century. Despite a 1952 shopfront alteration, the classical stone first floor surround with its piers, shields, and dentilled cornice remained. At the upper floors, brick end piers with ornamental caps rose the full-height to a metal cornice with modillions and corner consoles. Brick piers divided the facade into three window openings while brick spandrels separated the floors.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions:

The building at 641 Liberty Avenue occupied 100 percent of its 20' by 88' site, extending from Liberty Avenue through to a rear alley. According to a 1984 survey the interior measured 18' 10" by 85' 6", with its four stories rising to a height of forty-eight feet as recorded in a Sanborn Atlas.

2. Foundations:

The foundation was presumably of rubblestone, which was typical of the period, building size, and region.

3. Walls:

The Liberty Avenue facade and partywalls were composed of common bond brick work with 12" wall thicknesses at each floor as recorded in a Sanborn Atlas. The rear wall likely was also of common brick.

4. Structural system, framing:

The building was constructed with brick partywalls spanned by timbers across the 17' 6" of the interior, and spaced at regular intervals presumably 12" on center, allowing clear span loft spaces. The 1908 Liberty Avenue facade was framed with steel columns and girders as a back up to the new front.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors:

The original door configuration is unknown since it was altered as part of the 1952 glass store front. The rear had door openings cut for fire escapes at each floor of the easterly bay.

b. Windows and shutters:

Each upper floor had three rectangular window lights of one over one double hung windows. Small paired casement windows in a transom above the second floor windows and a transom above the fourth floor windows added variety to the fenestration. The rear facade had rectangular window openings cut into the westerly bay which rose to a penthouse.

6. Roof:

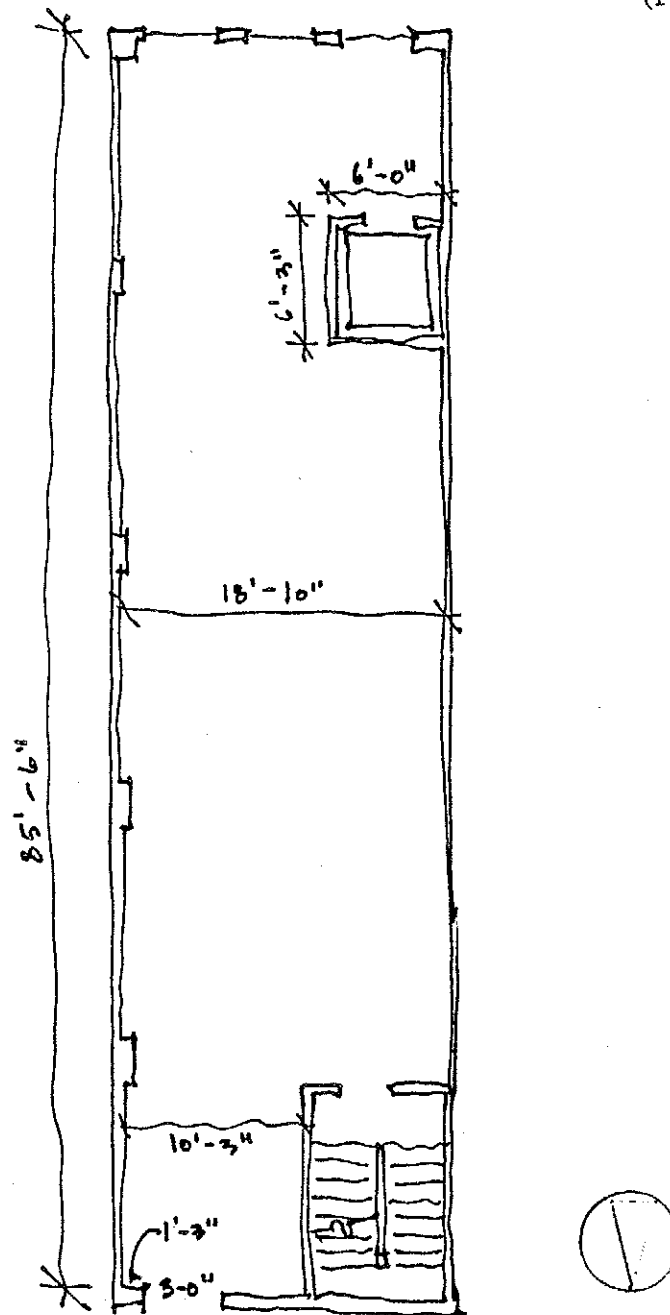
a. Shape, covering:

The roof, pitched back slightly, away from the Liberty Avenue facade, was composed of built-up roofing.

b. Cornice, eaves:

The building has a metal cornice with modillions and corner consoles.

c. A penthouse was situated at the rear west corner of the roof.



641 LIBERTY AVE.
(STEVES VALET)

Fig. 9. Sketch plan of First Floor of 641 Liberty Avenue, by John Bertola and Philip Snyder, of Kingsland, Bauer, Havekotte, Pittsburgh, PA.

C. Description of Interior:

Information about the interior comes from a 1984 survey by architects Kingsland, Bauer and Havekotte, which shows clear span open loft spaces, apparently vestiges of the building's original use as a produce warehouse. A stair was located at the rear along the west wall; an elevator was positioned along the west wall in the front third in the position that it had occupied prior to the publication of the 1927 Sanborn Atlas.

D. Site:

The Whitten Building, which faced roughly south, occupied 100 percent of its 20 by 88 foot urban site, abutting the King Building (639 Liberty) to the west, and the Keenan Building (643 - 647 Liberty) to the east, and extending back to Exchange Way.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views:

100 Views of Pittsburgh. H. Hammond Hook and Co., 1899.

R.L. Polk's Pittsburgh and Allegheny Directory, 1892.

B. Interviews:

Carolyn Boyce, Preservationist for Pittsburgh City Planning Department. Interview with George E. Thomas. Discussion of planning issues and proposed historic district.
18 December 1984.

Richard Palucci, Mellon-Stewart Contractors. Interview with George E. Thomas. Discussion of demolition, with photographs of buildings as basis for commentary. Mr. Palucci was the supervisor and prime contractor on the job. 9 January 1985.

Frank Crown, head of Crown Demolition which handled the actual wrecking of the buildings. Telephone interview with George E. Thomas. 9 January 1985.

John Bertola and Philip Snyder, interns from Kingsland, Bauer, and Havekotte, Architects. Interview with George E. Thomas about demolition of buildings and discussion of sketch plans.
9 January 1985.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Pennsylvania Historic Resource Survey Form, Office of Historic Preservation, PA Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, PA.

Pittsburgh Bureau of Building Inspection, Building Permit Filea, Public Safety Building, Pittsburgh, PA.

Pittsburgh Bureau of Building Inspection. Record Book of Alterations and Repairs, 1897-1914. Archives of Industrial Society, Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh Bureau of Building Inspection. Record Book of New Additions, 1896-1916. Archives of Industrial Society, Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh Bureau of Building Inspection. Yearly Docket of Building Permits, 1877-1916. Archives of Industrial Society, Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh.

Recorder of Deeds, Allegheny Courthouse Annex, Pittsburgh, PA.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Hopkins, G.M. Atlas of the Cities of Pittsburgh and Allegheny. Philadelphia, 1882. plate 1.

Hopkins, G.M. Atlas of the Cities of Pittsburgh, Allegheny, and the Adjoining Boroughs. Philadelphia, 1872. pp. 22-23.

Hopkins, G.M. Atlas of the City of Pittsburgh. Philadelphia, 1889. Vol.1, plate 5.

Hopkins, G.M. Map of Greater Pittsburgh PA. Philadelphia, 1910. plate 1.

Hopkins Co., G.M. Real Estate Plat Book of the City of Pittsburgh.
Philadelphia, 1923. Vol. 1, plate 4.

Lorant, Stefan. Pittsburgh: The Story of an American City. Second
Edition. Lenox, MA: Authors Edition, Inc., 1975. p. 265.

Pittsburgh of To-day. Compiled by the Consolidated Illustrating
Co., Pittsburgh, 1896.

R.L. Polk and R.L. Dudley's Pittsburgh, Allegheny and Allegheny
County Business Directory.

Sanborn Map Company. Insurance Maps of Pittsburgh. New York, 1927.
Vol. 1, plate 4.

Thurston, George H. Pittsburgh and Allegheny in the Centennial
Year. Pittsburgh: A.A. Anderson & Son, 1876.

Thurston, George H. Pittsburgh's Progress, Industries and Resources.
Pittsburgh: A.A. Anderson & Son, 1886.

D. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated:

University of Pittsburgh, Photo Archives

Prepared by: Carol A. Benenson, M.S., and George E. Thomas, Ph.D.
Clio Group, Inc.
15 February 1985

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Allegheny International project is a continuation of the downtown redevelopment of Pittsburgh's Golden Triangle. Spurred by the success of the Heinz Hall complex, and motivated by the availability of the Stanley Theater, the Allegheny Conference commissioned Llewelyn-Davis/Hanna-Olin to prepare the Penn/Liberty Urban Design Study which was completed in late 1979. The consultants found the region to be underutilized, and proposed three focii -- a performing arts center, a convention center, and the riverfront. Though buildings were often of high architectural character, changes in shopfronts had degraded the

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street level. Moreover, it was clear that as the effects of removing heavy industry from the river edge of the downtown continued to occur, the support zones that had developed to serve them in Penn/Liberty would become increasingly derelict. On the other hand, just as transportation had reshaped the region in the 1850s, it could be anticipated that the new subway would have a similar impact in the 1980s. The 600 and 700 blocks were found to have buildings of modest architectural interest -- with the exception of the Moose Hall, Kingsbacher's, and 631 - 633 Liberty, and recommendations were made that argued for the removal of many of those buildings to emphasize the area as a cultural center. It was assumed that in the end, while the Heinz Hall, Stanley Theater, and perhaps the Moose would stay, that the other buildings would be replaced by a larger office block fronting on Liberty Avenue.

Three years after the Llewelyn-Davis/Hanna-Olin study, newspaper stories reported the acquisition of property in the 600 block of Liberty and Penn avenues, by the operators of Heinz Hall, and in November of 1983 the Post Gazette reported that the Penn/Liberty project had been unveiled (19 November 1983). With Allegheny International as the prime mover two office towers would be erected, and the Stanley Theater would be restored. Land acquisition proceeded from 1980 until 1984, with the new owner being the Penn Liberty Holding Company or its subsidiaries.

In 1983 it became clear that the new project probably would cause the demolition of the Moose Hall while some concerns were expressed about the demolition of the adjacent shop buildings as well (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, "Triangle Landmark May Affect Tower Plan" 30 November 1983). The Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation dropped its opposition to the Moose Hall demolition in December of 1983 and on February 10, 1984, Louise Ferguson, Executive Director of the Foundation, announced their reasons. "Allegheny International would not go ahead with the Moose Building (in place on Penn Avenue)." The Post Gazette had already argued editorially "No Place for Moose" (5 December 1983), "What is clear is that the city stands to gain greatly from the construction of the new headquarters for Allegheny International, which will be a center for cultural as well as corporate activity. The Moose Hall should not be allowed to block that farsighted endeavor."

The final solution was a memorandum of agreement between the National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior, and the Pittsburgh Trust for Cultural Resources (Penn Liberty Holding Company), the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, and the Pittsburgh

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Historic Review Commission to record the streetscape elevation of 631 - 641 and 719 - 725 Liberty Avenue, the Moose Hall, and 636 Penn Avenue, and to provide individual elevations of 631 - 633, 637 Liberty and the elevation and plans of the Moose Hall. Sponsored by the Heinz Endowment, the drawings were produced under the direction of John Hnedak, Office of Cultural Programs, Mid-Atlantic Region, National Park Service, by Kingsland, Bauer, Havekotte, architects of Pittsburgh, PA, in the summer of 1984. Supervising architect was Roger L. Kingsland, and the buildings were measured and drafted by Philip J. Snyder and John A. Bertola. At that time, the buildings were also surveyed, and sketch plans and data on them were gathered. In the autumn of 1984, George E. Thomas, Ph.D. and Carol A. Benenson, M.S., of the Clio Group, Historic Consultants, surveyed the standing buildings, developed the research and historic background and prepared the written documentation. During this later phase of the project, Rebecca Trumball of the Office of Cultural Programs, National Park Service, assumed direction of the Penn-Liberty report.